

Nuneaton 10 Newport (Salop) 9

For the second Saturday in succession Newport have found themselves on the wrong side of a low-scoring game. The forecast heavy snow did not materialise and the rain abated as the game began, but conditions under foot were very heavy indeed.

Newport had been forced to ring the changes with regular starting flankers, Rhys Morgan (injury) and Mike Venn (illness), unavailable. New signing Jack Price made his debut coming in for Morgan on the openside, with Oli Buckley packing down on the blindside and Nathan Parker taking his place at lock. In the backs, the versatile Henry Vaka, was moved to the left wing, with Dave Archer starting at inside centre.

Despite the conditions, both teams to their credit, attempted to play some expansive rugby, but the game remained scoreless throughout the first 25 minutes, not through any lack of skill, but due solely to wholehearted, committed and organised defence. The Newport forwards carried hard and with purpose, with Will Roach, Kirk Robinson and Parker all to the fore. For the home team, ex Fijian international, Apolosi Satala, did not play like a man in his 40th year and was a constant threat with ball in hand.

The deadlock was eventually broken when Liam Holder slotted home a penalty after Nuneaton players had gone off their feet at the breakdown. This was followed up on 38 minutes, with a second successful kick, after an illegal tackle, putting Newport 6-0 to the good.

Billy Wara had made a note-worthy try saving tackle late in the half and overall there was no lack of endeavour, or effort from either fifteen, however it was clear this was not going to be a high scoring affair and that defence was going to dominate proceedings.

Within one minute of the restart, Nuneaton lock, Scott Makepeace had been dispatched to the sin bin, after an adjudged high tackle. To Newport's chagrin, Nuneaton's defence stood firm and Newport were unable to capitalise on the extra man. On 13 minutes, following a moment of Fijian flamboyance, with wings Wara and Vaka, executing a midfield scissors move, Nuneaton transgressed at the breakdown and Holder was able to extend Newport's lead to 9-0. Charlie Hill, now fully recovered from recent illness, replaced the hard-working Jon Evans at tighthead.

Midway through the half a nasty collision saw two home players prostrate and the game was halted for five minutes, while they received attention. This unfortunate incident and some forced changes of personnel and position, seemed to galvanise Nuneaton and they were certainly, if only marginally, in the ascendancy over the final quarter.

Newport's nemesis over the last half dozen games, has been a tendency to give away an unacceptable number of penalties. Pleasingly absent for the majority of the game, the referee repeatedly penalised Newport in the closing stages, which ultimately led to their defeat.

On 32 minutes Nuneaton were awarded a penalty five metres out from the try-line. They elected to take the scrum option and drove Newport back, enabling Satala to touch down and score. With the conversion successful, Nuneaton now held the narrowest of leads at 10-9.

The final minutes saw Nuneaton's defence hold firm and Newport had to once again be content with a losing bonus point.

Clearly there is disappointment in the ranks, but there are huge positives to be taken from Saturday's game. Newport's defence is solid and once again we have shown that we can compete with any team in this league. All five losses this season have been by margins of less than seven points. Game management needs some fine tuning and the ability to protect a lead in a tight game is critical (we have led in four of the five defeats).

It leaves Newport still in third place in Midlands Premier, but the margins are tightening up between 2nd and 7th places. If promotion hopes are to be kept alive, the game in two weeks at Peterborough Lions, is now, more than ever, a must-win. We would value any travelling support in what will be a season defining game.

Grass, Cowell (C), Evans, Robinson, Parker, Buckley, Price, Roach, Brown, Maule, Vaka, Archer, Perry, Wara, Holder

Goulson, Hill, Harrhy

Phil Gittus.